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ABSTRACT

This paper maintains that staff needs which are both implicit and explicit within the automation-laden technical services work in a library setting most often do not receive adequate attention from the library's supervisory staff. It argues that analysis of problem areas within a given unit in the library can better promote positive strategies for dealing with technology related concerns of library personnel. Further, the paper recommends that supervisory personnel be aware of the importance of reaffirming the value of the human services rendered by support or clerical staff within the work setting. (Author/MER)

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MOTIVATIONAL PROPERTIES OF SUPPORT STAFF TASKS
IN THE FACE OF AUTOMATION

by

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Concern for staff development among technical services support staff has not been a major focal point in the recent or near recent literature of library automation. Contemporary management theory, however, is replete with theoretical approaches to line and unit staff development and enrichment. Most approaches have attempted to blend the traditional managerial ends of "concern for people" with a "concern for production." Many others have seen the models of job redesign or contingency planning as not only the answer to this traditional managerial dilemma, but also as a partial answer to the more generic problem of staff development (Steers & Mowday, 1977; Steers & Porter, 1974; Paul, Robertson & Herzberg, 1969).

Rapid library automation, the transfer of automation-centered functions and duties to support staff, the increased educational levels of support staff, along with the desire to assume more meaningful tasks, have all contributed to the pressing need to conceptualize a model for paraprofessional staff development which is sensitive to an automation-laden task environment.

It will be suggested here that the motivational properties associated with support service tasks hold the most promise for supervisor manipulation. Consequential benefits to be derived may include the surfacing and reaffirmation of the value and worth of the support person as a vital human resource. A model for paraprofessional staff development, consistent with the realities of automation, will be suggested and developed.

For a number of years this writer has been intrigued by the relationship between the individual, the position, and the manager as interventionist in that relationship. We have argued, elsewhere, that many who do not largely perceive themselves in "change agent" managerial roles are in fact being nascent interventionists at the group or unit level, often with surprising effectiveness (Garten, 1978a; 1978b). As managers we carry not only responsibilities for staff growth and development, but also responsibilities for production efficiency. Just what are the issues most commonly found within a work unit which call for supervisor intervention?

Problems which hinder development and production most often can be subsumed under one of four categories: power/authority issues; morale/cohesion issues; standards/norms issues; and goals/objectives issues (Blake & Mouton, 1977). Such issues are encountered at the technical services unit work level and, whether one realizes it or not, two or more of these may be encountered in tandem.

Power and authority issues in technical services units most commonly arise when one or more support workers becomes embroiled in a "power struggle" with another support worker or workers who are on the same bureaucratic level. The question is often one of who has the authority in a particular decision-making context or who thinks he has the authority in a particular context.

Morale and cohesion problems in technical services units involve worker commitment to the job with concurrent commitment to the achievement of a sense of cohesion among co-workers who are on the same bureaucratic level. Often, what we initially perceive as morale problems, can be directly traced to power/authority issues. Power struggles have a way of deteriorating into total unit morale problems.

Norms and standards related problems in work groups most commonly surface when technical services staff workers violate personnel regulations pertaining to work hours, breaks, and other contractual agreements. However, such violations also occur whenever workers violate technical quality standards dictated by an automation-laden work environment. "Slip-shod" attention to protocols and routines fall into this category. In essence a norm has been violated.

Goals and objectives related problems most often arise when workers attempt to undercut "agreed upon" unit goals and objectives or pay "lip service" to clearly delineated goals subsequently proceeding in directions which are counterproductive to effective unit operations.

Research suggests that power and authority questions continue to be the most significant problem areas in most organizations and work units. (Blake & Mouton, 1976) Most certainly, however, the manager must recognize that the presence of one focal problem issue may have "spillover" effects on other focal issues.

The task of the technical services supervisor is somehow to move support staff from the environment where "felt needs and conditions" are in fact vividly "felt" by workers to a point where desired development is taking place. Desired development goals would reasonably include: high internal work motivation, high quality work performance, experienced meaningfulness of work, experienced responsibility for outcomes of work, and a commitment to personal growth in technical skill. We would suggest that a problem zone is nearly always present to some degree. The supervisor's role is to have the ability to discern when a problem does in fact exist and what the origin of that problem might be.

What kinds of "felt needs and conditions" does an automation-induced work environment present to the paraprofessional support worker? We suggest

the following as those minimal elements inherent in work environments that include automated functions. First, the felt need for variety appears to nearly always present. There are a variety of technical routines that must be mastered by the support staff worker in addition to protocols and routines that are added periodically. Depending on the nature of the automation-related assignment this variety could be great or it could be rather limited. However, from the perspective of the new, or fairly inexperienced support staff person, the element of variety is normally one which he or she psychologically seeks in an assignment.

Second, the element of task uncertainty is nearly always present in the automation-induced work environment. New, and in many instances, more mature workers, approach technical assignments that require computer data base manipulation with some degree of uncertainty, reservation, and at points, simple fear. The concerns, often not put into words, are: "Am I capable of learning the tasks?" "Can I overcome my anxiety about working in such an environment?" "Can I develop both confidence and competence in a short time?"

Third, the element of social interaction in the computer-induced work environment is present on two levels. The first level is the need workers expect to be met through jobs that permit social interaction and the need that is inherent in task-satisfaction for an acceptable level of social interaction or peer interaction which will allow tasks to be completed at an optimal level.

Fourth, support staff in the automation-laden work environment have the need to identify with the entire operation. The contemporary experience with support staff suggests that we are now dealing with a worker who has a higher educational level, who explicitly expects a certain level of growth and challenge in the work environment, and who desires to have a clear, if only general, understanding of the interrelationships present in any contemporary

technical services operation.

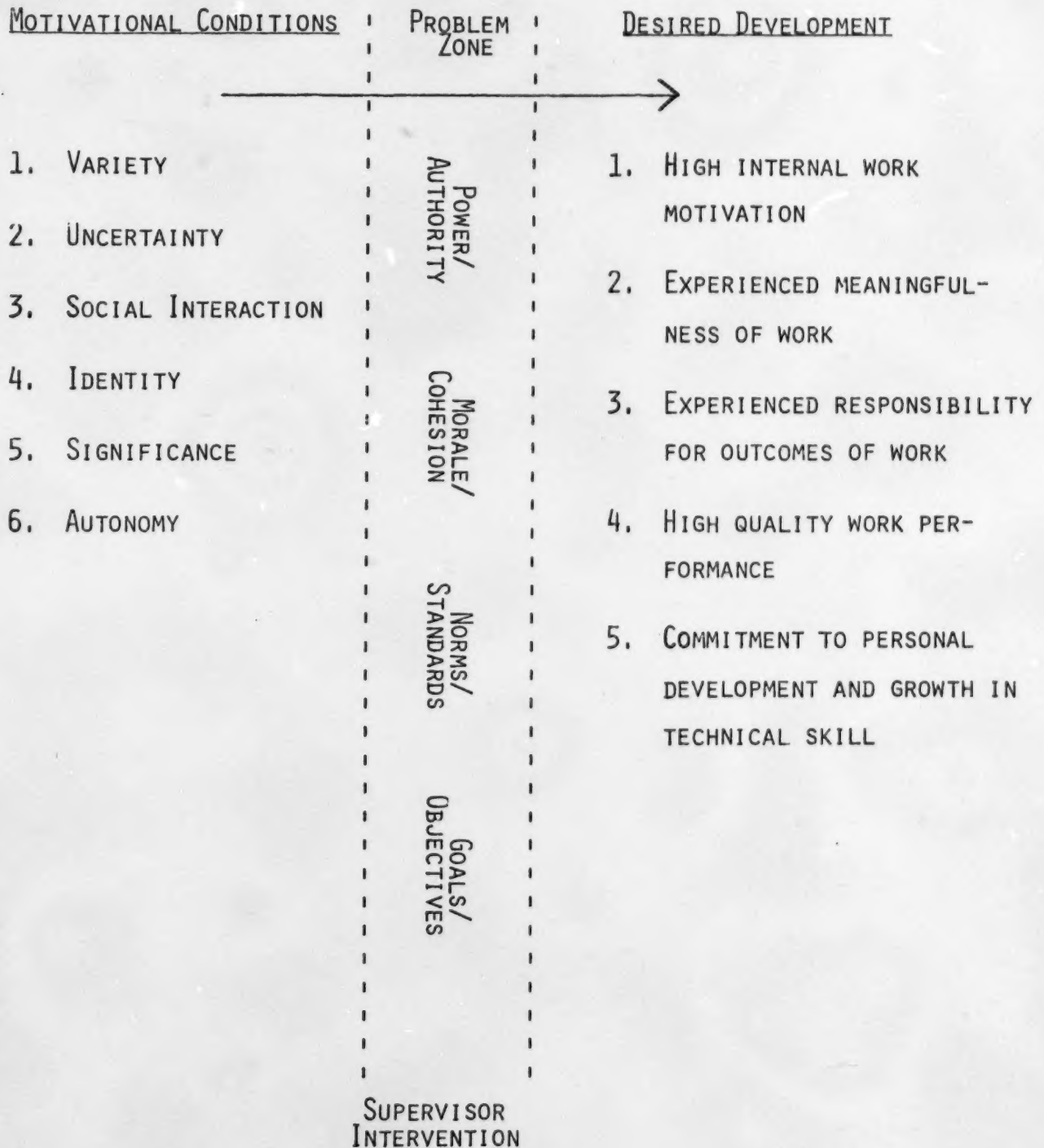
Fifth, support staff have the need, closely related to the need for identify, for task significance. Technical workers have a high need, as do all workers, for a sense that what they are doing is of significance. We have not come far from the ever underlying "cog in the wheel" notion. We only have surfaced its destructive consequences to a higher level. Significance in the grand scheme of things still remains critical in any human resource development model.

Lastly, we would suggest that the automation-laden work environment exhibits the need for a high degree of autonomy as a prerequisite for optimal production results. Workers are increasingly demanding a level of autonomy for the achievement of results within prescribed parameters and sensitive supervisors will allow for the development and extension of such autonomy as long as it does not affect other more peripheral work units.

The origins of task motivation within technical services units are diverse, but their major purpose remains the same: to explain the manner in which task conditions and needs influence employee efforts and performance to the end that both production and staff growth might be enhanced. The relative importance of task characteristics and conditions in the automation-laden environment remains ambiguous, as does the derivation of the tasks themselves. Perhaps other, more important characteristics, have yet to be defined as being present. Finally, while a sensitivity to the needs support workers exhibit in the automation-laden work environment is important, and while concern for redesign of jobs, informed by a knowledge of problem focal issue, is equally important, there is some evidence that such efforts may result in an increased staff training time along with much heightened costs of production. From the technical service manager's perspective a critical

question remains whether the benefits to be derived from staff development outweigh the costs involved in maintaining a production-oriented program. (Steers and Mowday, 1977).

AN AUTOMATION-SENSITIVE MODEL OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT



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